

## Chapter Eight

The first Americans he met were U.S. Immigration officials. They were rude and unkind; they talked so quickly that he could not understand them. He wanted to ask them about the train to Chicago, but the S/S Mauritania had just docked with three thousand immigrants who were lined up in long queues behind him; before he knew it he was ousted into the rain and cold.

Drizzling rain beaded his face. He had lost one of his two bags—it had been grabbed from him by someone, a child he thought, while he was standing in one of the many queues inside—but he was gloriously happy nevertheless; he was in America at last and would soon be Somebody.

Toivo stood on a sidewalk in Lower Manhattan gazing enraptured at the tall buildings and the faces of the people streaming by; these were Americans, and now so too was he. He saw only what he wanted to see—and all of it was good.

He clutched his one remaining bag tightly in his hand as he whirled around and around, jubilant and grateful—his future was here.

His euphoria soon deflated. He lost his other bag on the train to Chicago while he slept; fortunately his wallet with his remaining forty-three cents, his passport and other official papers, and the slip of paper with the address where he was going, were safe in the pocket he had sewn inside his pants during the Atlantic crossing.

Stumbling off the train, he stood outside Chicago's Union Station, overwhelmed by the din and hustle and bustle. Night had

fallen. He felt dizzy and slumped down on the curb to gather his thoughts. He had not been sitting long before he was rudely tapped on the shoulder. He looked up at the Chicago policeman's unfriendly face, got another hard tap from the nightstick—that one *hurt!*

He got to his feet, started to speak, got another thwack from the nightstick—and that one *really* hurt! The message was clear: the sidewalk was the policeman's domain, not a place for loitering strangers. Toivo scurried off with both a hurt shoulder and injured feelings.

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He came upon a restaurant. His mouth watered from the smells; he had not eaten since he disembarked from the Finnish steamer, three days earlier. None of the waiters understood his English; none could read his English-Finnish dictionary. He did not understand their language, nor did he know they were Greek. Even in his hunger and exhaustion he noticed the large painting of a young blond woman on a white, winged horse; it joltingly reminded him of how he had depicted his dead sister in one of his earliest paintings. Moved by the tears flooding the young man's eyes, the waiters sat him down at a table and fetched him some food.

The restaurant catered to artists; the tablecloths were butcher paper, there were pencils and charcoal in a cup at each table, and patrons were encouraged to draw.

Toivo picked up a piece of charcoal and sketched the four horsemen of the Apocalypse; he did not know why he chose them—perhaps because he was so hungry and the horsemen appeared like skeletons in his mind's eye.

The waiters—who knew and appreciated art, and sold the best sketches to *Lutz Illustrations*—admired Toivo's sketch, replaced his tablecloth with a fresh one and placed a feast in front of him, for

which they charged him thirty cents. He paid the bill; studied the thirteen cents remaining in his wallet, the waiters' friendly faces, and placed the last of his money in the cracked saucer on the table—he knew the importance of receiving appreciation from one's fellow man.

He stood up to leave and the painting of the young blond woman on the white horse caught his eye again; he did not know that blond women were a fixture in Greek mythology, he simply thought she looked so very much like his sister, and tears again filled his eyes.

The waiter who collected the thirteen cents assumed that once more the young man had been moved by Greek culture. He remembered that a week earlier a local artist had given his supplies to the restaurant to pay for the sizable tab he had run up; later that same evening, the artist had gassed himself. The waiter asked Toivo in broken English if he would like some paint brushes and other things; Toivo gratefully accepted.

With Mediterranean grandiosity, the waiter brought out the dead artist's oils, brushes, canvasses, and easel. Toivo was elated; he became even more so after the waiters insisted he drink several tall glasses of *retsina* wine. He set up the easel and a canvas and drank the rest of the bottle while he painted.

It was a wonderful painting; shades of white, gray, and black depicted the whitewashed restaurant; dashes of warm earth tones conferred the *gestalt* of the waiters; in the background fluttered stanchions adorned with unstructured blue and white pennants. Although Toivo and the waiters understood they might have fundamental differences and could not understand each other through spoken language, they also knew they were friends. He gave them the painting. They embraced him and urged him to return. He thanked them and walked off into the night with the dead artist's supplies.

By the time he located the tenement where Esa Muhonen lived, the high from the wine was leaving him. His head hurt. He was

exhausted and soaked to the bone. He entered the tenement hallway, water puddling around his feet as he looked at the door on which was a wooden plaque with the inscription 'Esa and Mirja Muhonen'. Someone had made an attempt to scratch out the 'and Mirja' and a cross had been scratched in with something sharp.

Toivo started to knock, but hesitated; he knew the hour was late. It was while he considered leaving when he noticed that long ago the hallway had been painted a warm yellow and that the paint was now peeling in large flakes. He liked that the doors had been painted green, the moldings stained dark brown, and that the floor was well-worn natural oak. Feeling reassured, he took a deep breath, and knocked.

From inside he heard a great deal of grumbling, then the door was flung open—and there stood Esa, looking much like the devil, with unkempt hair and glaring, ice-blue eyes tinged with red. He was drunk—dead drunk; behind him appeared a beautiful blond woman of Toivo's age.

The young people's eyes met; time stood still; they were drawn into each other's beings; they stopped breathing; their souls melded; they were no longer separate entities, that they both knew—they just did.

As drunk as he was, Esa caught the look in Toivo's eyes; he whirled to look at his daughter and saw the look in hers—then promptly slammed the door in Toivo's face.

Stunned and bewildered, Toivo slumped against the wall, holding his breath and feeling his heart pound like it never had, not even during the ghastly ocean crossing.

The door softly cracked open—and there she was again, with a blanket and a pillow that she gently tossed to him.

Their eyes again met and time again stood still—or was it racing? He didn't know; but he knew he wanted to feel like this forever.

From far off Esa harshly ordered his daughter back inside. She leaned a little closer to Toivo without entering the hallway.

“My name is Kerttu,” she said softly.

“Toivo,” he stammered. “My name is Toivo.”

Her eyes never left his as she mouthed his name silently to herself. She slowly closed the door; they both understood that a closed door did not matter, that there never would be any barriers between them.

He could see her bare toes under the door where she paused for a moment before turning off the light for the evening.

The clock in the nearby Roman diocese began to strike eleven. Toivo was too tired to note the hour, too emotionally bewildered, too anxious to think, too wet and cold to be physically comfortable, yet his mind raced and emotions soared; he was in America, he was in love, and he did not have any belongings or clothes or money or a place to stay—

*... will I see her again... how will I eat... where will I paint... how can I ever become Somebody...*

He slumped to the floor. He could taste the garlic from his dinner, dimly wished he had a toothbrush, and pulled the coarse woolen blanket around him. His world spun as he placed his head on the pillow; he smelled her scent and was soon blissfully asleep.

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In New York City, a young man realized something about himself that he did not want to accept; he jumped from a third-story window, breaking his back in two places. His family was wealthy; he would live, but he would never again walk without crutches.

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